

PIERCE COUNTY - STEPPING UP ON LIFE

"A woman who knows her self-worth is a beautiful woman." -- Quote from Kris Boyd -- young mother, widow and college student

Kris Boyd has always taken life a step further.

"After I graduated I got in trouble," she explains. "I started college in '96 at UN-K and was living in the dorms, and just took the partying a little too far."

A friend suggested they move to Lincoln, but after working at Taco Inn for six months, the partying began to take its toll once again. "I think we ate one time a day when we got off work. On Thursday night we'd head back to Hastings to go to a dance club, then Friday and Saturday we'd go to Kearney for a couple of parties, and Sunday evening would be country dancing at the Playmore in Lincoln. Then Monday we'd call in sick. After six months of that, I called my parents and said I'm ready to come home."

Kris moved back into her parent's home in Kearney where familiar faces made it easy to fall into the same crowd.

The problem wasn't the familiar faces. It was the unfamiliar ones that started her into alcohol and drugs. In 1998, she met more new faces: the law enforcement.

"My lawyer said to go to treatment before they tell you, you have to so I went to treatment for 30 days," she says of her decision. "It didn't really change my life around. It was just a place to clear your head for a moment."

Kris entered a halfway house in Norfolk, which she soon learned had both a negative and positive side. "The benefits of being court ordered is you have to abide by the rules, but the negative of someone being on their own is that temptation to walk out anytime."

IT WASN'T SURPRISING that Kris hit what she calls "a couple of bumpy spots" while she was at the halfway house. She was only 19 and "I just couldn't quite get the idea that I couldn't do the guy thing," she recalls with some humor.

Kris was at the halfway house for six months and had yet to graduate from the drug and alcohol course. She had been on probation for two years and her counselor agreed to do out-patient counseling. She was put on probation for two years, from February of 1999 to 2001. It was a break she's grateful for: "It worked out that my probation officer said OK, otherwise I would have been in York (detention) which could have been a whole different story."

The counseling continued, but so did the partying behavior when she wasn't under the watchful eye of the house staff.

Then one summer night in 1999, Kris went to a wedding with her boyfriend. "He was a bartender and it really hit home for me. Do I want to live this lifestyle or do I want to live clean and sober?"

She didn't have to ponder her thoughts long.

When Kris returned to the halfway house that weekend, she missed curfew and was locked out. It was at that point where "I was forced to sink or swim," she says.

Meantime, there was a handsome middle-aged man named Brett whom she met at the Hastings Regional treatment center. The two had moved to Norfolk at different times. He lived in the men's halfway house and Kris in the women's. The two houses did not do counseling together. "We'd been in treatment together and he hated me," Chris laughs. "He thought I was very immature, yet we teased each other back and forth."

The flirting continued. She was 19, he was 39. But the 20 year difference was in number only. The commonality of what they had been through and their attraction to one another developed into dating. "He was a real stand-up guy, charming in some ways and wild in others, and yet very old-fashioned. He had a vitality that was just there."

Months later Kris learned she was pregnant. The couple was soon planning a wedding and afterward resumed their life in Norfolk. Brett was driving truck and Kris was working full-time at J C Penneys.

IN APRIL 2000, Brandon Boyd was born. Kris cut her job at Penneys to half-time to spend more time with her new son and be home when Brett got home from his over-the-road trucking job. During this time he encouraged Kris to go back to college, but she didn't see the immediate need. "I kept telling him I have plenty of time for that," she remembers.

Brett's job was keeping the family financially secure, but that security would soon be exhausted when, almost a year after Brandon was born, Kris received a phone call from her husband's boss.

"In the middle of a stroke (Brett) managed to come out of the hills and pull his semi over into a truck stop. Even as he was climbing out of his truck he hit his head because he was uncoordinated, but he still managed to save the truck -- very classic signs of stroke. Despite the medical signs, the hospital dismissed him with the diagnosis of inner ear infection and instructions to check with his doctor when he got home.

Back home in Norfolk, Brett was still disoriented so Kris checked him into the hospital emergency room. He was sent home with a more accurate diagnosis and medication but was unable to work, so Kris was grateful when she was offered more hours at her retail job.

"For three months I supported my family while Brett managed to recover," she said. "We thought this was definitely a blessing. When he went back to work I was able to cut my full-time at Penneys."

The Boyd family's routine was back on track.

Until Brett suffered another attack. Once again he slowly recovered, but the trucking company could not take the risk of having him on the road.

Eventually, Brett was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis.

Kris was forced back to work full-time again to support her family. Although she was getting above minimum wages at Penneys, the medical bills were piling up faster than her paychecks, and the disability checks weren't appearing in the mailbox.

Despite the frustration, Kris's faith never failed to focus on the positive: "It took six to nine months to get Social Security disability, but God was working in our lives because March and April are slower times in retail -- hours were bare minimum -- and on June I was called by the halfway house. They were opening up a new house and needed employees."

For four months Kris worked both jobs, often putting in 72 hours a week and getting only a hour or two of sleep a night, while Brett was a full-time dad.

But the long hours were taking its toll on Kris, and Brett's condition continued to deteriorate.

"I was worn out. I was making good money at the halfway house, so finally I made the decision to take two weeks off at Penneys to see if I could live without it. Brett was a really good dad and a good cook, making good homestyle meals, but I missed my family."

In June 2003, Brett's condition worsened, his body dividing: "One side had the pins and needles feeling all the time and the other side was fine. There are people that have minor attacks and get better, there are those who have more frequent attacks. Brett pretty much had an attack every year."

TO CUT EXPENSES, Kris learned of a small house in Plainview for rent. Not only was the rent considerably less, she also fell in love with the cozy atmosphere of the older home.

Moving meant a 32 mile drive to Norfolk, but their new home was only a block from school and the couple found the small town atmosphere a safe haven for their young son to grow up in.

Then Brett suffered a massive stroke with the MS in June of 2005. He had to stay at a care center for several weeks before he could come home. "The first week (he was home) he said 'I can take care of Brandon'. I think he needed that sense of who he was in the family because of his role, but gradually Brandon started day care."

In the fall of April 2006, Brett died of complications of MS. Kris had just started a new job so she could be home with Brandon when he came home from preschool. After her husband's death, she quit her job. "They say you do some irrational things at times like that, and I guess I did." But there was no regret. Although her income was minimal, mother and son spent the summer getting to know one another, a luxury that had not been afforded to this young working mother for a long time.

It was time once again to take life a step further, and this move was a giant step forward. Kris signed up for nursing classes at Northeast Community College in Norfolk in the fall of 2006. "I always knew I would be a competent nurse," she says. "I know I can do it. One of my favorite classes is microbiology and I love it."

Since she goes to school full time, however, she can't work. "I have benefits for my son and myself, and if I go past a certain limit I lose those benefits like my son's Medicaid due to his medication and I can't afford that -- that's the number one priority, and I get daycare." Kris could receive housing assistance, but the house she lives in is too old so she has to come up with the rent on her own.

She manages to budget the bills through survivor's benefits and buy groceries with food stamps. It's not a benefit of choice: "Right now I have \$35 for gas money for the rest of the month, so I have to figure each day how much gas I can use. Sometimes I can't even stop after school for groceries if it means using extra gas.

"I feel frustration when I hear about welfare moms -- the verbally negative comments. Other people don't know the shame to go to the grocery store with an EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer). I don't want to be a burden."

What's Kris finds even more frustrating is the drop in benefits if she does work. "If I could say anything to the lawmakers, it would be do not punish widows and single mothers for trying to work. I occasionally fill in at the halfway house and because I work, my food stamps have dropped. I pay \$300 in rent which is my choice. It's my responsibility because I choose to live here. And even though rent is cheaper in a small town, there's still utilities and the commute -- that's \$200 a month and it never matches. It never adds up."

Although Kris qualifies for Medicaid, not always does she get the medical assistance she needs and can't afford it on her own. She still owes thousands of dollars in medical bills from her husband's illness and can't get picked up by a private insurance company because insurance companies shy away from insuring addicts -- even in recovery and also my son has a pre-existing condition that requires daily medication.. She hopes someday to get a job that provides health insurance.

It's the hope of a better life for her son and herself that keeps Kris struggling through college, and it's through the struggles that she's become the amazing woman she is today.

"An empowered woman is a beautiful woman," she reflects. "I feel like I've grown so much."